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STATE FOR EUR A/S JONES

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/01/2023

TAGS: IT IZ PREL ITALY NATIONAL ELECTIONS

SUBJECT: WHAT THE PRESIDENT'S VISIT MEANS FOR BERLUSCONI

REF: ROME 1915

Classified By: Ambassador Mel Sembler for Reasons 1.5 (B)  
and (D).

¶1. (S) The President's visit to Rome takes place one week before Italians vote for their 78 representatives to the European parliament and some local officials on June 12-13. The results of the vote will be interpreted as an early test of how Berlusconi is likely to fare in national elections to be held no later than 2006, and as a referendum on Italy's involvement in Iraq. This is because the Europarliment vote has become a head-to-head contest between Prime Minister Berlusconi and European Commission President Romano Prodi, the odds-on favorite to run against Berlusconi for the Prime Ministership in the next national election, thanks to the decision by each man to lead his party's ticket. Prodi's campaign has tried to capitalize on widespread public displeasure with the presence of Italian forces in Iraq by calling for immediate troop withdrawal; this goes well beyond the opposition's earlier position that those troops should be recalled only if the United Nations was not given a "leading role."

¶2. (S) Prodi's anti-war stance had been gaining him momentum before Berlusconi's recent meetings with Kofi Annan in New York and President Bush in Washington. The Prime Minister blunted that momentum by spinning the Annan and Bush meetings as discussions about how best to achieve a "turning point" in Iraq after June 30 via a political process guided by the United Nations. This allowed him to portray opposition calls for immediate withdrawal as feckless electioneering by politicians who previously championed a UN role but now can't seem to take "yes" for an answer. Berlusconi also gained traction by hinting that his opponents might have motivations less palatable to the electorate, such as closet anti-Americanism. (That explains the spate of requests to the Embassy from opposition leaders wishing to lay wreaths at the U.S. WWII cemetery, something they had not asked for on previous Memorial Days and probably would not have done now were it not for a desire to show they are not anti-American.)

¶3. (S) Notwithstanding Berlusconi's efforts, the percentage of votes garnered by his coalition on June 12-13 will probably decrease from its victorious showing in the 2001 national elections. A reduction of five percentage points or less can be written off as normal for an incumbent government in what amounts to a mid-term election. Any loss much greater than that, however, will be portrayed as public rejection of Berlusconi and his Iraq policy, and will make it politically harder for him to remain steadfast in his support for the U.S. We therefore have an interest in helping the Prime Minister do as well as possible. We can do so by ensuring that the media messages coming out of President Bush's visit portray Berlusconi as a respected world leader who is working effectively on a strategy for a UN-led political solution in Iraq that overcomes Italian fears of being caught in a quagmire.

¶4. (S) The key words are "political solution" and "United Nations." Italy's electorate wants its country to play an active role on the international stage, but is nervous about the use of military force. Hence it will be important to stress that an internationally-supported political process is underway in Iraq. The maintenance of security via a multinational force can then be justified as a necessary precondition for that process to succeed. Regarding the role of the UN, the Italian public has become convinced that the only road out of Iraq is through New York. The analysis may be fuzzy and a set-up for inevitable disappointment when a UN-endorsed interim government does not turn out

to be a panacea for all of Iraq's problems. But it is what the majority of Italians want to believe, and what Berlusconi -- ever the masterful politician -- will no doubt provide them.

15. (S) From Berlusconi's point of view, the best scenario would be for a new resolution endorsing the forthcoming Iraqi transition to be approved by the UN Security Council immediately before President Bush's arrival. That would allow him

to trumpet the progress being made in Iraq by responsible members of the international community -- including, of course, himself -- and contrast that with the carping by Italy's opposition. Even if a UNSCR has not been passed, however, the President's expression of continued U.S. commitment to a new resolution will be important. That, coupled with thanks to the Prime Minister for his personal role in advancing a UN-led political solution and recognition of Italy's positive contributions to Iraq, will bolster one of our strongest continental European allies and help Berlusconi avoid censure from the Italian public on June 12-13.

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